



United States Mission to the OSCE

Statement on Tolerance and Non-Discrimination: Roma and Sinti

As prepared for delivery by Ms. Erika Schlager, Member, U.S. Delegation
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Last year at the Maastricht Ministerial, we adopted an "Action Plan on Improving the Situation of Roma and Sinti within the OSCE Area." Today, Mr. Chairman, we are reviewing that plan, as well as the participating States' implementation of OSCE norms with respect to Romani minorities. Given the limited time for addressing this subject, I would like to focus on two related issues: Romani political participation and the registration problems faced by Roma at the local level.

We are encouraged by some recent trends. This year, for the first time, a Romani candidate from Hungary was elected to serve as a Member of the European Parliament. An increasing number of Roma have been elected to offices at the municipal or regional level in countries such as Bulgaria, Romania, and Slovakia. Roma were also successful candidates in the last Hungarian parliamentary elections, following the historic decision of the two leading mainstream parties to compete for the Romani vote and to place Roma in electable positions on their party lists.

In this context, the continued development of diverse Romani organizations remains an important vehicle for fostering Romani political participation. The Roma Press Center in Budapest, the Roma Press Agency in Kosice, and the Bulgarian Human Rights Project, for example, provide increasingly sophisticated and timely analysis. Other non-governmental organizations have helped train and support an emerging generation of Romani political leaders.

Unfortunately, the Hungarian parliamentary experience remains an isolated example of positive outreach. Even in countries where Roma form a sizable part of the electorate, Roma are often ignored by political parties. Like other minorities, Roma can, of course, form their own ethnically-based parties should they wish to do so. But compelling them to do so because they effectively have been excluded from mainstream parties could increase ethnic divisions and hinder inter-ethnic integration.

There have been some instances where electoral campaigns have become tainted by political anti-Romism - the phenomenon of appealing to anti-Roma prejudice as part of a political campaign. In this regard, the U.S. was troubled by reports of anti-Roma leaflets distributed in Samokov and Razlog, Bulgaria during the local election campaign last year.

Perhaps the most important aspect of Romani political participation is the role of Romani voters themselves. When Roma are denied registration as residents of the municipalities in which they live, they are prevented from participating as full citizens and unable to exercise one of the most fundamental rights of citizenship: the right to

vote. Accordingly, the United States is concerned by persistent reports that, in a number of countries, some municipal authorities continue to refuse to register Romani residents. This situation may be even more complex where Roma are internally displaced persons or where Roma are hampered by a lack of identity or citizenship documents. We are encouraged by Slovakia's recent passage of a law that no longer requires individuals receiving social benefits to provide a permanent address.

Mr. Chairman, my delegation would welcome intensified OSCE engagement in this area, building on the Action Plan. In particular, the United States:

- welcomes the inclusion of Roma on OSCE election observation teams;
- encourages the ODIHR and OSCE field presences to support “get-out-the-vote” campaigns and voter education programs for Romani communities; and
- encourages the OSCE to work with governments to address the problem of the lack of identity documents and municipal registration for Roma in those instances where it may occur.